The Fourth Church Pulpit

OUT OF THE WHIRLWIND

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John M. Buchanan

FOURTH
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A LIGHT IN THE CITY

126 East Chestnut St. Chicago, IL 60611-2094
Phone: 312.787.4570
John M. Buchanan, Pastor

Scripture : John 1:1-5, Job 38:1-13
"Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind ..." Job 38:1

When the preacher launches a series of sermons on a particular topic or book of the Bible there are, of course, some risks. One of them is that the hearers will get tired of listening to the same story and run out of interest before the series runs its course. One member of our church family stopped me early this morning — he was walking his dog — and told me he liked my sermon last week, but admitted that when he sat down, opened the bulletin, and saw Job he said "Oh no — not that again!"

The other risk is that the preacher will run out of steam, or out of resources. Just as that happened, after I had read all the standard Biblical and theological reference works on Job, another unlikely one came to my attention. It is a children's book someone had given me some time ago: *Old Turtle,* by Douglas Wood, beautifully illustrated by Cheng-Khee Chee.

Old Turtle won the Children's Book Award last year. And of all the resources I have looked at in our reflection on the Book of Job recently, *Old Turtle* may be near the top of the list.

> "Once, long, long ago ... yet somehow not so very long. When all the animals and rocks and winds and waters and trees could talk there began an argument.
>
> "It was an argument about God
> ... the breeze thought God was a great wind:
> ... the mountain thought God was a snowy peak:
> ... the fish thought God swam in the ocean:
> ... 'She is a hunter' roared the lion.
> ...'God is gentle' chirped the robin."

Old Turtle finally speaks and reminds all that God may be seen in everything.

> "God is the life of the world," Old Turtle says.

But then a new family of beings arrives and the argument starts all over again ... They come in many colors and shapes, with different faces and ways of speaking and, before you know it, they are fiercely arguing — about God — and they start to hurt and kill one another and they hurt the earth.

Until another voice speaks: "Please stop!" and the mountain spoke and told about seeing God in the sea, and the ocean saw God in a snowy peak, and rocks saw God in the breeze.

> "And people listened and began to hear, and to see God in one another and in the beauty of the earth ... And Old Turtle smiled."

It's a nice book: no sex or violence and carefully politically correct; just right for any children in your life.

What, you might ask, is it doing in an adult sermon at Fourth Presbyterian Church? The answer is that the book leads its readers to the same place the ancient poet who wrote the story of Job is heading.

When God finally speaks to Job it is, in fact, out of the whirlwind.

You know the story of Job by now. God and Satan are arguing about the apparent willingness of human beings to believe in God, trust in God, be faithful to God. "Consider, my servant, Job," God says.

Job is a good and faithful man: blessed with material wealth, secure, comfortable, a loving husband and father of ten wonderful children. "Consider Job," God says to Satan, ... "there is no one quite like him."

Satan is not impressed. Who wouldn't be good and faithful with all that wealth and that wonderful big family? "Take it away," Satan suggests. "Take his wealth and children and see if he believes in you then." And so the drama begins.

Job's livestock, servants and children — all ten of them — are killed.

Job loses everything: his wealth, his family, even his wife's kindness. When three friends try to console him they make matters worse by telling him that his suffering is his own fault. God is just, so Job must have done something wrong.

Job will have nothing to do with it. He has done nothing to deserve his suffering. It cannot be God's will. For 37 chapters Job argues with his friends, rants and raves, and finally in anger, brings his case to God: demanding that God explain what happened, or at least say something: pleading for some evidence that God is there, that God cares, that what has happened to him has had some impact on God.

Finally, after 38 chapters of poetry, God speaks. And what a speech it is. Actually, God's answer is in the form of questions God has for Job, a lot of questions ...

Out of the whirlwind God speaks: "gird your loins like a man. I will ask for a while, and you will answer."

> "Who is this – who is asking all these questions? Were you there when I laid the foundations of the world? Who shut in the sea, commanded the morning, entered the storehouses of the snow..." Relentlessly God asks and the questions form what one commentator called "the majestic, musical pattern of creation." [Norman Habel, *Job*, p. 91] Ocean and clouds, rains and wind... And then a gorgeous parade of life – the splendor of the animals. "Do you know where the mountain goat lives? Do you know who has let the wild ass go free?" ... ostrich, horse and hawk.

And at the end, Job having now confronted the fact of his humanness, his mortality, the fragility of his life, his security systems, his relationships, even the lives of his dear ones: that is to say, having learned what human life is, Job now looks into the void and confronts the mystery of God.

> "I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you."

That's all Job wanted, all he really needed: not an answer to the question of innocent suffering, not even an answer to why he, a good and faithful man, has been so cruelly afflicted. What Job wants and needs is what you and I want and need when our lives begin to crumble and we have to deal with tragedy, loss or suffering, namely to learn that we are not alone in this, that someone is there in the darkness, that there is a God who hears our lament, who is receptive to our expressions of grief, impatience, resentment, even anger. What Job wants and needs is to confront the mystery behind all existence, the infinite mystery of God that will not be explained by human logic, human theology, if you will.

And that process, that basic encounter with the existence of God, this ancient poem suggests, happens not when we study hard, reading all the theology and philosophy we can get our hands on; not even when we pray without ceasing, but when we stop what we are doing long enough to look around and simply be amazed at what we see — creation: a world that was before and will be after us, a world teeming with strange and wonderful life, a world surrounded by a universe beyond anybody's imagination.

Marcus Borg is a New Testament scholar whose book, *Meeting Jesus Again For The First Time,* some of us studied together this fall. Borg begins by telling the story of his faith journey. It sounded familiar to many of us. He was brought up in an active and caring Lutheran congregation. The church and Christian faith were at the center of his life. In the stage that he calls "pre-critical naivete," he simply, as is the case with most of us, believed whatever people in authority told him. And then he went to college and experienced a collision of his pre-critical naive religion with modern science.

"The modern world-view with its vision of what is real, the universe as a closed system of cause and effect, made belief in God – a nonmaterial reality – increasingly problematic." [p. 7]

Gradually, most of what he believed was challenged, questioned, examined and discarded. And even though he went through the motions of religion, his agnosticism slowly became atheism.

Can you remember when your childhood faith bumped into the modern world? I do. My experience was similar to Borg's. Somehow I made it to college without anyone ever suggesting to me that the Bible was not literal history, that creation may not have taken place in seven twenty-four hour days, that the Red Sea may not have parted exactly the way it did when Charlton Heston lifted up his arms and commanded it to. Freshman Geology was a crisis of faith.

Along with the question of innocent suffering and its personal expression – "Why am I suffering? I have done nothing to deserve this," – the most critical challenge to faith for modern men and women is the interface with science, those places where the assumptions of religion seem to be questioned, or dismissed, by human reason, by laboratory science. There are, in the "Culture of Disbelief," a lot of closet atheists ... people whose faith survives only because they never allow it to encounter science or human reason. And there are many forms of religion which ask adherents to park their intellects outside the front door of the church.

Marcus Borg, interestingly, found that his closet atheism kept being challenged by experiences of "nature mysticism," what Jewish philosopher Abraham Heschel called moments of "radical amazement" which "transform our perception and the earth is seen as filled with the glory of God, shining with a radiant presence." [p. 14]

And so Borg reconsidered: began to do something very healthy, began to doubt his doubts: came to that good and healthy place of wonder and awe before the magnificent and unlikely miracle of existence. That's exactly what happens to Job. His pre-critical naivete, his childlike assumptions were violently ripped away. He had believed all his life that the wicked are punished and the righteous prosper and now he had to deal with the hard reality that things don't always work out that way. He has assumed that if he was faithful, God would look out for him, bless him with material comfort and protect him from harm. And now he had to deal with the reality that his own life has not played out according to this set of rules. Job is a man struggling with unfaith, with atheism. He's still talking to God, but Job is a man on his way toward cynicism, nihilism.

And then God speaks, and it is out of the whirlwind. It is God shrouded in mystery. It is God revealed in the magnificent music of creation.

Christianity has not always paid attention to that experience, has not always trusted it. One of the earliest and most persistent heresies has been a simplistic sense that God is everywhere and in everything. Pantheism is the technical name for it. It is actually a very popular and contemporary heresy with many adherents. "I don't have to go to church for worship – I can commune with God on the golf course" – is actually the credo of a confirmed pantheist.

Besides, nature seems to be terribly cruel occasionally. If God is primarily known in natural phenomenon, the people whose homes were flattened by Hurricane Gordon last week have a major theological or moral crisis on their hands. And so, Christian theology has been rightly cautious about depending too thoroughly on nature to mediate God's grace.

But in the process, we may miss something terribly and profoundly important. A generation ago, Rudolph Otto, a German thinker, wrote what has now become a classical theological text, *The Idea of the Holy,* in which he suggested that the reality of God has always been accessible to human beings, has always been breaking into the consciousness of human beings through experiences that he called "numinous," the "mysterium tremendum" – "the overwhelming mystery that elicits trembling even as it also attracts us in a compelling way."

Why do we feel something holy when our breath is taken away by a gorgeous sunset or snow-capped mountain, or a quiet opening in the woods, fragrant, still? A dear friend of ours calls those glorious sunsets with the rays of the sun illuminating clouds from below and behind, setting of a kaleidoscope of violet and red and pink and gold, calls it a "Bible sky" and we know what she means. What is that about — or more, what is my instinctive reverence about? University of Chicago theologian Langdon Gilky wrote a book, *Naming the Whirlwind,* in which he suggests that

> "Common aspects of our experience; our deep joy in living, a sense of pulsatory vitality and strength of life that every creature knows: the awe at the common wonder and beauty of life – perhaps in the creation of nature or the birth of a child ... are not created by us, but are given to us." [p. 311]

Writing from a feminist perspective, Elizabeth Johnson observes,

> "Anyone who has ever wondered at the beauty of a sunrise, the awesome power of a storm, the vastness of prairie or mountain or ocean, the greening of the earth, the fruitfulness of a harvest, has potentially brushed up against an experience of the creative power of the mystery of God." [*She Who Is,* p. 125]

Part of the problem is that there seems to be a fundamental conflict between science and religion. Since Charles Darwin introduced his ideas of evolution the church has been uneasy and sometimes outrightly opposed to scientific inquiry. It has seemed at times that the two are utter and unalterable enemies. The current creationist/evolutionist conflict over how to teach about the beginnings of the universe in public school classrooms is a case in point. *The Wall Street Journal* just this past week covered the latest expression of the ongoing battle, this time over a new biology textbook, *Of Pandas and People,* which "uses scientific laws to argue that the world is too complex to be explained away by Charles Darwin's mindless natural forces." Therefore, the book suggests an "intelligent agent" must have sat at the drafting table. [*Wall Street Journal,* 11/14/94] Uh oh! Sounds like God's coming in through the back door. A "stealth book," the ACLU called it, and that aroused Phyllis Schafley and the Eagle Forum which rushed to the book's defense. How sad. Most scientists don't like the book — not because of its theology but because it isn't very good science.

The truth is that science itself leads to that sense of radical amazement and awe and reverence. Albert Einstein himself wrote:

> "A conviction akin to religious feeling of the rationality or intelligibility of the world lies behind all scientific work of a high order."

And the *New York Times* reviewed a new book by a distinguished physicist, Frank Tipler, which tries to address the unanswered cosmological question "Who detonated the Big Bang?"

There are, of course, scientists who are not believers or deists, or even agnostics. But there are also many, an increasing number apparently, who are moving in the opposite direction: exquisitely skilled scientists who find themselves moving in the direction of faith, not in spite of science but because of it: because science has brought them to the experience of radical amazement, and wonder ...

One of the most eloquent of them was the late Lewis Thomas, head of the Sloan Kettering Cancer Clinic, a physician and a biologist, Thomas never called himself a believer, but over and over he wrote about how much science does not know about the incredible complexity of all life.

Thomas never claimed to be a believer but he dedicated himself to teaching reverence for life, amazement before the beauty and glory of creation from one-cell plants to the creative genius of J. S. Bach, who he dearly loved and whose genius was as unlikely and miraculous as the opposing thumb and the feathered wing. Elizabeth Johnson would say he was brushing up against the mystery of God.

Let's write ourselves into the Job story now. When God speaks in the ancient story of Job — it is in an experience of nature mysticism, "out of the whirlwind." And what God says to Job is not theological argument, and it is not moral imperative. God doesn't try to offer logical proofs for God's existence and God doesn't dictate a list of rules and regulations to be obeyed. Instead God speaks in poetry and what God says to Job essentially is "open your eyes and look around."

The poetry of God in Job 38 has its imitators:

D. H. Lawrence, reflecting on a serene glade in the woods teeming with life:

> "how splendid it is to be substance here ...
> All that is right, all that is good; all that is God takes substance ...
> In confirmation, I hear sevenfold lark songs pealing."

Gerard Manly Hopkins:

> "Glory to God for dappled things ..."

And my favorite – Edna St. Vincent Millay:

> "Lord, I do fear
> thou'st made the world
> too beautiful this year."

I was reading a book of essays by a Jesuit Priest, Anthony DeMello. Fr. DeMello devoted his life to teaching in India and he made an observation that struck me. Many of us, he said, are like

> "tourists on a bus that is passing through gorgeously beautiful country: lakes and mountains and green fields and rivers. But the shades of the bus are pulled down. they do not have the slightest idea what lies beyond the windows of the bus. And all the time of their journey is spent in a squabble over who will have the seat of honor on the bus, who will be applauded, who will be well considered, and so they remain to journey's end." [*The Way to Love*, p. 3]

It is the week of Thanksgiving. If, in your busy, hurried, urban life, you find that the holiday has crept up on you unnoticed; if you're not sure any more what it is you're supposed to be thankful for, maybe you need to pull up the shades. Open your eyes. Look around at the glorious good creation, and let it mediate to you the one who made it all and who gives it to us to use and enjoy.

"I know my redeemer lives," Job protested in one of his darkest hours. Next Sunday we begin the lovely journey of Advent; to celebrate God's coming into human history with love and grace and justice and compassion. When we Christians read Job's words — "I know that my redeemer lives" — we think of Jesus and the way he lived so thoroughly the life you and I live: and how by dying he showed us that there is nowhere we can go that God does not go with us: and how his resurrection is the glorious good news that love conquers death and that nothing will ever separate us from God.

But before we get there, walk a while longer with Job and learn a basic lesson of faith. Our redeemer is also our creator. Our creator is the one who loves us and stands with us. And God spoke out of the whirlwind.

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In this season of Thanksgiving, O God, we express our gratitude for all you have given. As we celebrate with our families and friends, help us remember your presence in the world, your light in the darkness, your love — in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.